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## ANDREW LANG'S "THE MYSTERIES OF HISTORY" \*

(By ÉMILE FAGUET)

Mr. Andrew Lang has contributed to the English magazines a dozen articles on certain obscure points of modern history; and the searticles have been extremely popular. M. Téodor de Wyzewa has translated them into a very pure and elegant French.

These historical mysteries are as follows: The "Iron Mask" (you were probably expecting that), "Kaspar Hauser," "Jacques de la Cloche," "The Count of Saint Germain," "The Conspiracies of the Gowries," "The Assassination of Escovedo," etc.

But you will say: "There is no Louis XVII!"

"No, there is no Louis XVII."

"What sort of volume can be written on the mysteries of history without a Louis XVII?"

"It does seem difficult; but for all that this book of Andrew Lang's has its interest. One must not ask too much. One must not even ask what one would seem certain of receiving. Even that is indiscretion."

In general, in the treatment of his historical mysteries, Mr. Andrew Lang inclines toward the solution which is farthest removed from the legend. He believes that it is safer to assume the minimum of romanticism in history.

Thus, Kaspar Hauser has been considered as the son of a duke, the son of a margrave or the son of Napoleon First. According to Mr. Andrew Lang — and he proves it very well — Kaspar Hauser is merely an hysterical imposter who said not a word of truth during his three years' residence in Nuremberg; who made out of whole cloth the most effective romance possible, a romance, that is, which is neither systematic nor consecutive, but is constructed simply of vague hints that each

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\* An appreciation of one of the ablest of living English writers by the most eminent contemporary French critic should be read with interest by thoughtful Americans. The original of this article appeared in a late number of *Les Annales Politiques et Littéraires*.

hearer binds together to suit himself; flatly self-contradictory, moreover, from one sentence to the next.

He was probably an ordinary young peasant, who left his parents for one reason or another, perhaps because the itch for wandering troubled him, and who tried to prepossess the good burghers of Nuremberg by brigand inventions and the irresistible charm of mystery.

As for his strange death, Mr. Andrew Lang is persuaded that he committed suicide. He shows that Kaspar Hauser had more than once before inflicted injury on himself to attract attention and sympathy. The last time he probably struck a little too hard and a little too truly. On this last point Mr. Lang's argument is less convincing and his proofs less abundant. He leaves me in doubt, and I believe he is not quite sure himself.

. . . . .

As for the "Iron Mask," the principal thought of Mr. Lang is still the same. It has been conjectured that the Iron Mask was a brother of Louis XIV, a minister of Louis XIV, a prominent political character, or Molière; a more modest guess has named him an insignificant Italian diplomat, Mattioli. This sounds more reasonable, being less romantic.

But suppose we become less romantic still? Suppose we assume that the Iron Mask was a mere servant? That would seem still more likely to be true, being still more commonplace. "The humble truth," said Maupassant. It seems that the truth can never be humble enough to satisfy Mr. Lang.

And in fact he proves to us convincingly enough that though Mattioli may have had a mask of iron — or of velvet — he died in 1694 (which seems extremely likely) and that the Iron Mask — that is, the velvet mask — followed by the restless eyes of history till 1703 and dying at Paris, in the Bastille, during that year, must be another.

And what other? A certain Martin, merely. Only a valet of Roux de Marsilly, named Martin, and the possessor, after the death of his master the only possessor, of certain important secrets.

And I must admit that the thesis is well maintained and pre-

sented with a great air of plausibility. This valet of tragedy is very interesting, in any case, and if he was what Mr. Lang believes him to have been, his vanity must have been amply satisfied. Imprisoned in the next cell, at Sainte-Marguerite and at Pignerol, to Fouquet and Mattioli, and conscious that, common prisoner as he is, he is much more important than Mattioli and Fouquet; conscious perhaps (why not?) that he is vaguely suspected of having once worn a crown — and repeating to himself:

*"Je m'appelle Martin et ne suis qu'un valet;*

but I count for much more, in the plans, the fears and the instructions of M. de Louvois, than these *grands seigneurs* that surround me," that certainly must have flattered his feeling of conscience not a little.

And yet it is true, if Mr. Lang is not mistaken, that it was not until two hundred years and more after his death that the lines could be written:

*Le masque tombe; un valet reste  
Et le heros s'évanouit.*

This Iron Mask, in the last analysis, is for Mr. Lang a character represented by two persons: Mattioli and Martin each played his part. "The fortunes of the two men have been combined in a single myth." Very well! we have another double character, this one really of noble birth. He was Jacques de la Cloche. This Jacques de la Cloche was almost certainly a natural son of the King of England, Charles II. But here is the question: Did he die obscurely, under a Jesuit robe; or, having been a Jesuit earlier, did he throw himself into a career of adventure, checkered with imprisonments and drubbings, and die an unbeliever?

Some think that the Jesuit and the adventurer were one, others that the adventurer is only a false Smerdis, a false Dmitri, a false de la Cloche in short, who assumed the rôle of the son of Charles II, posed as the Pretender, and lived the short and violent life I have mentioned.

The question remains extremely doubtful. It is certain enough that the Jesuit disappears absolutely from history, so com-

pletely that he is never mentioned again, at the very moment when the adventurer from Naples appears. It is certain enough that many statements made by the adventurer from Naples have been recognized as perfectly accurate and as being such as might very easily have been made by the Jesuit. It is certain enough that the very things which made the Neapolitan adventurer's identity doubtful, serve in the last analysis to confirm it; that for example, it was said at the time: "He claims to be an English prince, and he does not know a word of English!" whereas this very Jacques de la Cloche, the young Jesuit, born in Jersey, knew no other language than French, etc.

But, on the other hand, there is a certain testament left by this Neapolitan adventurer which indicates a man who knows nothing of affairs in England, of the affairs of the Royal Family, nor, so to speak, of himself, if he were the son of Charles II, and which, on the whole, is a model of absurdity.

What are we to think? "We must be honest and doubt," said Mérimée, who I am sure would have taken the keenest pleasure in reading Mr. Lang's captivating volume.

There are cases, however, when Mr. Lang scorns to doubt; when he expresses his convictions most decidedly. He has the levellest head a man could well boast. He is not determined to find a solution, and where there is no solution he does not insist that there is one; but when his opinion is settled, he does not, on the other hand, affect an elegant scepticism. Thus, he has coolly reversed the contemporary judgment in the case of Elizabeth Canning.

This Elizabeth, whom it is possible that you do not know, (and to tell the truth, I have not known her very long myself), this Elizabeth was a girl of limited responsibility, as the doctors put it, that is, not very intelligent, but very good and honest, in repute for uprightness and carefulness of speech, so that there was no reason for suspecting her *a priori* of falsehood. This Elizabeth, on the first of January, 1753, left her mother and her little brothers to go and visit her aunt. She did not return till the 29th of January, emaciated, livid, bloody, ragged, half dead. What was her story? That she had been struck,

dazed, dragged and carried off by two men who met her in Bishopsgate Street, then held prisoner for twenty-eight days in a horrible building, where she was kept in sight by four women and young girls of vicious appearance, maltreated by them and fed as little as possible; that she had succeeded, the 29th of January, in escaping by leaping from her window to a cart shed. She was asked: "Was it at the Wells woman's place?" and she agreed that it was at the Wells woman's. She described the house, not badly, but insufficiently. They took her there. She seemed to recognize the place, it must be confessed; but she did not seem absolutely certain, it must be confessed also.

It was finally decided to give her story provisional credence and to arrest two of the four women. One, whom the evidence pointed to as the principal offender, was condemned to death, the other to be branded. A reprieve was granted because very vigorous protestations were raised against the sentence, among others by the Lord Mayor. An alibi was proven — or *almost* proven, — by the principal defendant, and she, as well as her supposed accomplice, was released.

And now it was Elizabeth's turn to be accused of "false witness and perjury." She was condemned to seven years of exile in New England. She married honestly there, and died in 1773.

Mr. Lang is convinced that she told the exact truth. He considers her condemnation as the height of folly. He says, very cleverly, that Elizabeth Canning "was the victim of the celebrated *common sense* of the eighteenth century. The history she told was strange, and it is one of the principles of *common sense* that what is strange cannot be true."

I am less confident than he. Understand me: I am convinced that in this affair it was impossible to condemn the Wells woman and her friend. In order to convict those women, it would have been necessary for Elizabeth to *prove* that her sequestration story was true. Now it must be admitted that she did not succeed in proving it. All the credence that Mr. Lang allows her report rests on the fact that she was a very good girl. Very well; but that is not sufficient. She was a very good girl, but subject to fits of *absence* (do not find a play on

words, I beg you) in consequence of a wound on the head which she had received in childhood. We dare not accept implicitly everything she says. Then, in order to believe her, we must have proof. We must agree that she proved nothing. Therefore, there was no reason for condemning the Wells woman and her friend, however little sympathy we may feel with their characters in general; and the Lord Mayor of 1753 was right.

But, on the other hand, to condemn Elizabeth would be just as unreasonable, if not more so. She certainly told what she believed to be the truth and what may have been the truth, — but what may also have been false; although there is no reason for doubting her sincerity. She was absolutely innocent. The magistrates and jurors of 1754 were not victims of their *common sense*, as Mr. Lang says; they were victims of their logical faculty, of a rigorous logic, narrow and miserable, which has done much harm in this world.

They (I take them *en bloc*) condemned the Wells woman and her friend. It is proven to them that they have done so without sufficient evidence. They acquit them. Very well. But they tell each other:

"Now then, if the Wells woman is not guilty, it is Elizabeth who is guilty, — guilty of perjury.

And they feel themselves bound by the inexorable law of that syllogism. But the syllogism is folly. Real life had not the rigor of such logic. You acquitted the Wells woman. That does not say she was innocent. It says simply that her guilt was not sufficiently proven. Elizabeth did not tell the truth. That is to say, she did not prove her statements; but we have no reason for assuming that she lied. She may have imagined all she told, in perfect good faith.

Must the fear of contradiction lead us — and here is the tyranny of logic! — to conclude that, because it is not proven that one party is guilty, it is proven that the other party is guilty? O logic, logic, how much hast thou to answer for!

The only word in this affair was *non liquet*; and when *non liquet*, the only solution is to convict no one.

. . . . .

Another case, more curious still, is the Harrison affair. Oh, this one is ineffable! Did you ever read the English novel in which a man who has been hanged for assassinating somebody meets his victim on the street and offers him a glass of beer? The Harrison story is almost as remarkable, and it has the merit of being true.

Harrison, farmer of the Viscountess Camden, starts out one morning for a neighboring village to collect some rents, and disappears.

They find on the road his comb, broken, his hat torn, and his cravat, stained with blood. Of his body, not a trace.

His servant, Perry, told some fantastic stories, terribly compromising for himself, his mother and his brother, without, however, confessing anything; but there was enough in his stories, if they were taken seriously, to condemn a whole family, or a whole clan, for that matter.

They were taken seriously. Perry, his mother and his brother were brought before the judge. They defended themselves stupidly. They denied the murder; but they confessed a certain robbery of which they were innocent, which was taken as a sort of half confession of murder. In the end they were all three condemned to be hanged, and they were all three hanged. As the sequel of the story will prove, Perry was crazy, and that was the solution of the whole affair.

Some months after the hanging—that is about two years after the disappearance of Harrison—the murdered man came quietly home again. His explanation of his absence was amazing. While returning from the village, he had been met on the road by two horsemen, who had carried him off, hammered him with their swords, filled his pockets with gold, taken him to a seaport, where he had been put on board a vessel, captured by corsairs, sold as a slave among the Turks, treated severely and beaten like plaster by a Turkish gentleman who owned him, a man of eighty-seven years who was still strong as a Turk; then he had escaped and come back.

He was crazy too. Everybody in this affair is crazy. Crazy or stupid liar, he was at least still alive. Three innocent victims had been hanged.



But the cravat, and the comb, and the hat? thrown down on the road, no doubt, to divert suspicion; for the cravat was bloody, but there was no trace of blood on the road. Thrown down by whom? That is what no one knows. By Harrison's kidnappers, if he was kidnapped; by Harrison himself or an accomplice of Harrison's, if he simply took French leave.

Mr. Lang supposes that Harrison was carried off and kept in durance by some one to whose interest it was that Harrison, depository of some political secret, should disappear for a time. A rather romantic hypothesis, and Mr. Lang has here inclined toward the romantic more than he ordinarily does and in absolute contradiction to his rule of action, which is to exclude romance and legend obstinately from these affairs. I should be inclined to believe in a simple flight of Harrison's for entirely private reasons. The story he told on returning seems rather the contrivance of an ignorant, narrow mind which lacks inventive power, than one that intelligent or semi-intelligent men might have dictated or suggested to him.

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The book is amusing in a remarkable degree. It proves the hackneyed saying: "Would you have extraordinary stories, in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe and Hoffmann? They are not hard to find. Look over the pages of history. The true surpasses all the inventions of men's brains."

*Translated by R. T. HOUSE.*

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